

## Dewitt Talmadge Tipton

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While Dewitt Tipton's experiences are interesting and noteworthy, I found his (and his wife's) observations on what was occurring back at home to be both interesting and worthy of sharing with all who view the exhibit. They reflected a side of America unknown to many, and in this age of instant communication, forgotten by almost all.

At the time the war began, Dewitt was still in high school. Given a deferment to finish, he entered service in 1943. After finishing basic training, the next 8-10 months were spent in construction/engineering training. In June of 1944, his unit left for Scotland and upon landing, were transported to England, then directly to France. They landed at Utah beach, several weeks after the invasion.

As a member of the 160<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineering Battalion of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Army (Patton's group), *their job was to build (and sometimes destroy) bridges* to keep the army moving, or to prevent the German Army from retaking captured ground. As described by Tipton, the 14 months (with almost no break) were very routine (but always dangerous), with little change in activity. Usually under fire, this engineering group was not atypical of other such groups. Their unit suffered many casualties, often having to function as infantry as they did their work. Constantly on the move and often working around the clock, their efforts allowed victory to happen.

One of the most noteworthy achievements of their unit (and of the entire war) was when they finished an 1896 foot pontoon bridge capable of supporting tanks across the Rhine river in 22 hours.. This is equivalent to six and a third football fields across a river with a strong current, accomplished under fighting conditions, (see picture)

*As cited in the opening paragraph, I was fascinated by the response to questions asked about what was going on back in Mitchell County. The discussion started when I asked what it was like back here at home, then how the locals felt about the internment camp at Montreat, and generally what was discussed about the war. Phoebe (Tipton's wife) responded somewhat vaguely, saying there really wasn't much discussed, and even more surprisingly other than for major happenings (or notification of locals wounded or killed in action), not much was known about the progress of the war. When I pursued this line, Tipton re-entered the conversation with some fascinating comments on the realities of Mitchell County in 1944 and 45.*

***Tipton pointed out that in those years, not only where there very few radios in their part of the county, most were so poor that they could not even afford telephones, and no one owned cars. As such, communication (and knowledge of anything beyond the horizon) was very limited, a concept today that would be very difficult for a child or young adult to understand. Tipton told of how, even after the war, the only way to get anything sizeable moved is if you knew someone with a cart and mule (or horse).***

*Other combat experiences discussed included eating under the extreme conditions they faced. Because they were constantly involved in activity more physically demanding than the foot soldier, they were fed better than most. Usually a mobile kitchen was part of their unit so they often had the luxury of hot meals, something rarely enjoyed by most in combat. Another interesting observation was on their \$50 per month salary, some of which was deducted for laundry. Go figure. By the time his deduction for his mother was taken out, he ended up with \$20 per month.*

One of the most harrowing experiences Tipton encountered was typical of the dangers they faced. Forced to make a night assault in preparation to bridge yet another river, they had to ferry infantry across to attempt to provide cover for their next day's work. In the process of doing so, they had to cross the rapidly flowing river (at night), then return. *Because of the current, they were carried away from the area where they had started, essentially ending up in enemy controlled territory both in the crossing and the return. Several of those who accompanied him were wounded, just missed being wounded or (in his case) fortunately escaped injury. As always, fate played her hand*

Tipton and Pheobe told about how, in their correspondence, two of his letters were inadvertently switched in their envelopes by the censors, something apparently not uncommon. Fortunately, no one was embarrassed this time.

The day the war ended in Europe, Tipton's unit was working on a road. They saw two American staff cars driving by, with German Officers inside. Tipton said he turned to his fellow workers and said simply, 'the war's over,' and for them, it was. Scheduled to be shipped to the Pacific, by the time they had pulled back and prepared for the trip, the war in the Pacific was drawing to a close. Instead of heading further east, they returned home to Mitchell County.

After the war and before Tipton ended up working where he finished his career, he attempted farming. During those years, the State provided night schooling in farming, for which Tipton was paid \$80 per month to attend. He also was briefly involved in Veteran's organizations, but dropped out "because all they ever wanted was money."

*Tipton's observations on how his service career impacted him immediately after the war and later years was interesting. ...and very simple ....and speaks to his nature. He said he felt it had no impact on him..."but changed those that needed it."*

[Ed. note: Document remains in its original format. All italics are represented in original document.]